



The harbour that almost was.

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The Harbour That Almost Was

By Dr Peter Wilson

Ships leaving the ports of Glasgow, Liverpool, Belfast and Dublin bound for North America have to go either north-about (around the north coast of Ireland) or south-about (around the south coast of Ireland) to gain the open Atlantic. Which route is followed depends in part on the destination port and the time likely to be taken to reach it. In the middle years of the 19th century when both steam and sailing ships were regularly making the crossing, weather conditions were also an important factor when considering which route to take. The prevalence of north-westerly's caused sailing ships in particular to take the longer, and slightly safer, south-about route. So it was proposed that a Harbour of Refuge be established at The Skerries in order to encourage owners and skippers to go north-about in the knowledge that a safe haven was available should sea conditions prove tricky on leaving the North Channel.

On Monday 12th October 1857 a number of landowners, merchants and other interested parties met in the Portrush school-house to discuss establishing such a harbour. The meeting was convened by George Macartney, MP for Antrim, and presided over by the Earl of Antrim. A resolution to pursue the Harbour of Refuge proposal with Government was passed unanimously, and a committee was appointed to progress the cause.

On Thursday 25th March 1858 a Committee of the House of Commons took evidence regarding the desirability of the proposed harbour at The Skerries. Prior to gathering the evidence, the following comments were made by Mr. Hoskyn, Admiralty Surveyor, concerning the facilities The Skerries afforded for such a harbour:

"The Skerry islets on the coast of Antrim form a chain of one-and-a-half miles in length and are nearly parallel to the shore, from which they are one mile distant. The eastern islets afford fair shelter to a few small vessels in moderate weather; the holding ground, however, is not good, being for the most part sand and stones; these islets are separated from the western group by a sound of 528 yards width, having a depth of 13 fathoms, through which a heavy sea runs into the anchorage. The proposition appears to fill in this Sound with the lesser openings, so as to form the whole chain of rocks into a continuous breakwater one-and-a-half miles in length, leaving the Channel between Ramore Head and the Western Rocks still open; and in this way I have no doubt that a good



roadstead would be obtained, exposed, however, to easterly winds but which do not bring home much sea. Being easy of access, this anchorage is much frequented by coasters, and would be still more valuable to them if the islands were connected."



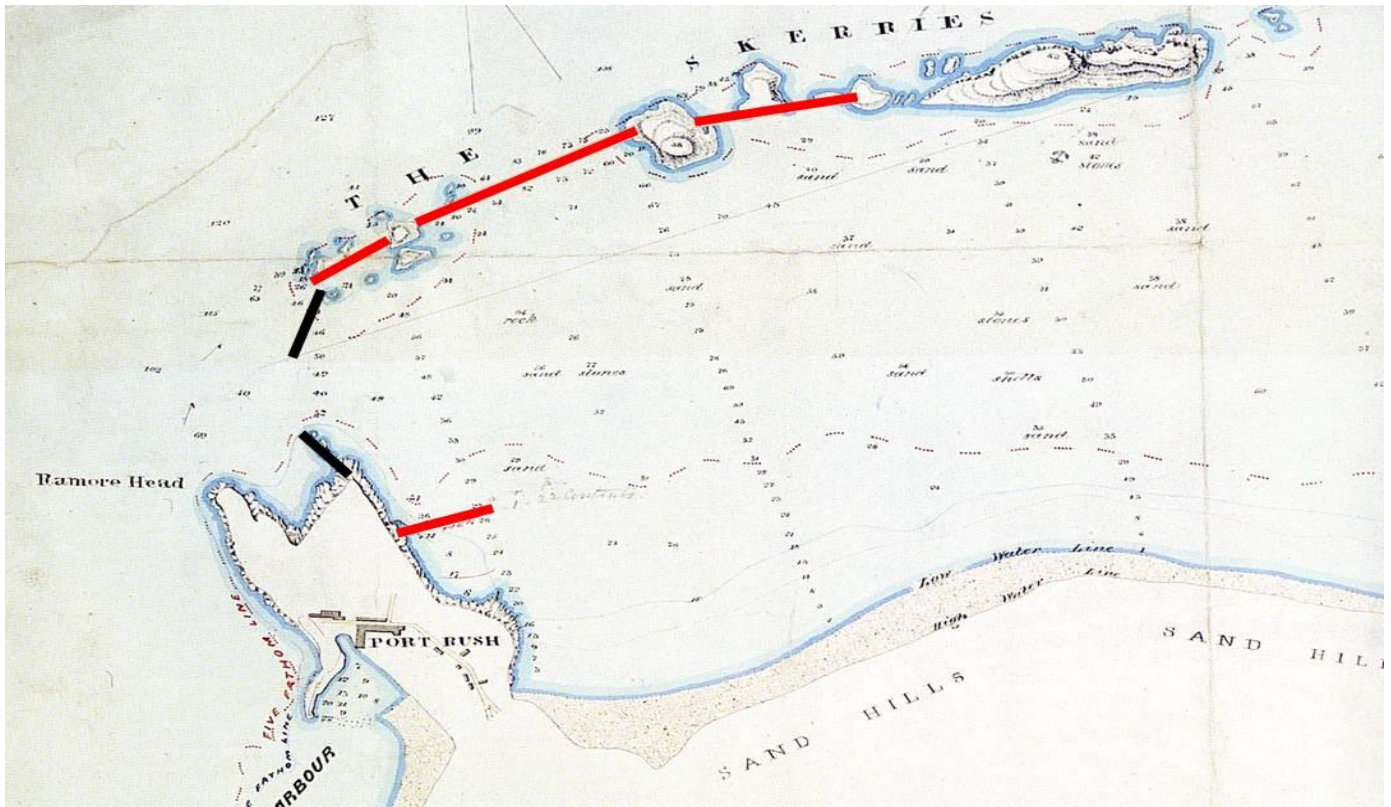
And, perhaps with an eye to an uncertain future:

"From the geographical position of these islands, they would, if connected by a breakwater, become a convenient station in time of war for a squadron (of ships) watching the entrance of the north channel....."

And, regarding suitable rock for construction purposes:

".... an abundance of material may be obtained within an easy distance...."

These encouraging comments were followed by numerous supporting statements from the maritime experts called to give evidence. The natural basin created by Ramore Head and The Skerries was viewed by many as the job already half done. All that was required was to close the gaps between the Skerry islets. It was proposed that this should be done by filling the gaps with rubble stone (basalt boulders) obtained from local quarries and then constructing a masonry wall on top, as shown by the red lines on the map. In this scheme the east and west ends of the harbour would be left open allowing ships to enter and exit as required.



John Hawkshaw's map of Ramore Head and The Skerries. The red lines represent the proposed breakwater linking The Skerry islets, and a short pier on the east side of Ramore was also proposed. The black lines (inserted by the author) indicate the approximate positions of breakwaters that would have narrowed the western entrance to the Harbour and provided calmer waters within during north-westerly gales.

Other opinion favoured narrowing the western end of the harbour by building two breakwaters, as indicated by the black lines on the map. This, it was argued, would reduce the amount of water disturbance within the harbour during north-westerly gales. Another view was that redundant ships filled with rock could be sunk at strategic points as a means of extending the breakwater.

Irrespective of these different ideas, the cost of the scheme was put at £100,000 and the construction period was estimated as 2-3 years. This would have resulted in a short-term economic boost to Portrush, and over the following years the development of storage facilities, ship-repair



yards and ancillary businesses would have probably occurred. The town would have undoubtedly prospered.

Those questioned by the Committee were all of the opinion that Lough Foyle and Lough Swilly were inferior as anchorages and places to run to during north-westerly gales. They were said to be both difficult and dangerous for sailing ships to enter and exit, in contrast to the scheme to provide refuge at The Skerries.

Amid all the column inches devoted by the Coleraine Chronicle for the weeks of 31st July and 7th August 1858 to the evidence gathering of the Committee, one question and answer may have provided a moment of light relief. One witness was asked if there was much smuggling along the coast. Came the reply, "Only whiskey".

Alas, the Harbour of Refuge was not to be. Although The House of Commons Committee recommended it should be developed, the Government did not proceed with the scheme. Some say that officials connected with the ports of Coleraine and Londonderry objected to the Harbour because it might take work away from their tradesmen. Others point the finger at some influential ship owners who opposed Harbours of Refuge in general, preferring quick crossings of the Atlantic in order to maximise profits, and relying on insurance policies in the event of shipping losses. Their view was that Harbours of Refuge served only to delay sea crossings and, if used by their skippers, increase costs.

If The Skerries scheme had found favour with the Government and had gone ahead it is interesting to consider what could have happened some 80 years later in World War II as the Battle of the Atlantic unfolded. Portrush and The Skerries might have become a strategic location for the British Atlantic fleet and also the focal point in the bid to ensure the safe passage of Atlantic convoys. This would have put the town at the heart of the maritime war effort. In return, the town and its Harbour of Refuge might have had regular nightly visits from the Luftwaffe.

That is all speculation, but a positive response from Government in 1858 could have resulted in another, very different, chapter in the history of Portrush.

Acknowledgement: My thanks to Dr Colin Breen for providing a copy of Hawkshaw's map.

Portrush Heritage Group would like to thank Peter for this most interesting contribution to our series of Heritage Newsletters. 27th March 2021